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THE INFLUENCE OF THE UTERUS ON THE
FEMALE CONSTITUTION,

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AN ADDRESS

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

BURLINGTON COUNTY MEDICAL SOCIETY,

OCTOBER 16, 1849,

BY

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JOSEPH PARRISH, M. D.

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THE INFLUENCE OF THE UTERUS

ON THE FEMALE CONSTITUTION:

ADDRESS.

Members of the Medical Society,—The assembling of ourselves together on this occasion, offers a fit opportunity for the discharge of an obligation, which, by your appointment is due at my hands; and in attempting to redeem it, you will allow me to read a rather discursive essay on the influence of the uterus on the female constitution; the distinctive peculiarities of which, taken together with the fact of its greater susceptibility to morbid impressions, renders the subject one of unusual interest. Although the human female possesses a finer frame, and a more delicate organization than man, she is liable to a greater variety of disorders, dependent in considerable measure upon mere sexual formation, and is required by the unalterable laws of nature, to endure more real suffering in a condition of health, than falls to the lot of the stronger sex under the effects of even painful, and protracted disease. The lengthened process of gestation alone, with its multiform developments of sympathetic affections, elaborates a series of changes in the habits of her constitution, to endure which the physical energies of the strongest man would seem totally unequal,—

and even before she becomes fitted for the performance of the gestative function—while yet in the years of childhood, she may be visited with some affliction peculiar to her kind;—at that period also, when she emerges from the budding of youth, to the bloom of early womanhood, she is surrounded with dangers, and looks forward with fearful anticipations, which none but those who have realized them can comprehend. If nature be at all in fault, her danger is greatly increased. If she be prematurely visited with a copious menstrual flow, the vital forces sink below the standard of perfect health; or if the menstrual period be protracted beyond the time for its approach under ordinary circumstances, the system becomes disordered with a variety of symptoms, which may exhibit themselves in a greater or lesser degree of violence, as there may be more or less inequality in the nervous and sanguine temperaments. To enquire into the pathology and treatment of some of these affections, shall be my chief object on this occasion; and without attempting to support any of the various theories which have obtained from time to time, with reference to the *modus operandi* of the sympathetic relations which exist between the uterus, and other parts of the body, I propose simply to offer the result of my own experience, and leave you, gentlemen, to form your own conclusions, as to how much attention ought to be paid to the uterine functions, when treating even ordinary diseases, which are not dependent upon sexual peculiarities. Having the medical supervision of a family of females, numbering on an average, one hundred and fifty individuals, most of whom are between the ages of twelve and seventeen years, I have enjoyed some opportunity of observation upon this subject.

They occupy the same building, partake of a common diet, and are engaged when in health, in the prosecution of studies, beginning with the elementary branches of an English education, and rising to the higher pursuits of mathematics, the languages, drawing, music, &c. &c. I propose

to show that *most of* the diseases that I have been called upon to treat in these young persons, and those of the same class, who come under daily observation in private practice, owe their origin to uterine derangement. Hysteria, hæmoptysis, asthma, coughs, head-aches, pains in the breast, and other ordinary, and some anomalous affections, may be generally traced to irregularity or deficiency in the uterine function. While there can be no doubt that these diseases occur in young women, with perfect menstrual development, experience teaches that in the majority of instances they are dependent upon the generative system; because, with a restoration or regulation of the menses, the diseases become either greatly modified, or entirely disappear; and where it is beyond the power of our art, to restore the natural uterine action, they continue without relief. Two of the inmates of this family, each about seventeen years of age, from widely distant sections of the country, and with very different early habits, both of them possessing highly cultivated minds, and apparently in the enjoyment of perfect health, have been subject to attacks of asthma, which occurred at the menstrual period; and as this period with each, arrived nearly at the same time, the affection appeared simultaneously in both;—for several months these patients were brought to the infirmary at stated intervals, and placed under my care. It was found, that they were menstruating *with difficulty* at the time of the attack, that the asthma was sympathetic of dysmenorrhæa; and that with the entire subsidence of the catamenial flow, the asthmatic symptoms disappeared. The treatment of the paroxysms consisted of hot mustard pediluvæ, hip baths, assafœtida enemata, dry cups to the spine, free purgation, &c. &c.,—and between the attacks, a tonic plan of treatment was enjoined, with exercise, bathing, and other hygienic remedies, calculated to establish the vigor of the uterine function. Under this course of management, they menstruated freely, recovered from the asthma, and enjoyed general good health af-

terwards. Three others, all from the south, were attacked with chorea, which continued obstinate while the uterine action remained deficient, the ferruginous and aloetic treatment was adopted in each case, with quinine and assafœtida, &c. Under this treatment, the matrix began by and by, to yield the catamenial secretion copiously, the muscular contortions subsided, and the patients recovered rapidly. That the chorea in these cases, was entirely dependent upon the languid condition of the uterus, I do not pretend to say, but that it was ungovernable till the menstrual discharge was fairly established, seems to prove that nature, aided as she was, by supporting and soothing medication, was unable to accomplish the cure, till the womb responded to the remedies employed, and supplied in sufficient abundance its natural secretion. In private practice, several instances corroborative of this fact, have come under my observation; and one lamentable case occurred, where the uterus failed to act, and the patient died. This poor girl had never fairly menstruated, a slight show having appeared only once or twice. Her case presented the characteristic signs of chorea, in the most aggravated form that I ever beheld them; she was in very humble life, and deprived of many advantages that are within the reach of others better circumstanced, and the early part of her sickness was neglected, owing to the fact that the contortions of her face and limbs were attributed to habit; so that scolding and ridicule took the place of proper remedial measures, in order to cure her. Iron and aloes, hip baths, mustard to the lumbar region, a blister over the cervical vertebræ, musk, cimicifuga, shower bath, &c. &c. &c., were all tried without success. I believed then, and am still of the opinion, that had she been in a situation where she could have received the attention that is necessary in such cases, the uterine action might have been established, and that she would have recovered. There is no disease however, more dependent upon the sexual system than hysteria, and I use the term here in the limited

sense in which it is generally received, though always associating it in my mind, with whatever symptoms may present themselves, that can be traced to uterine sympathy.— And I will now attempt to describe two highly interesting cases of hysteria, and the treatment pursued in each of them. One, is a young girl of sixteen, tall, with well developed muscular system, light hair, ruddy complexion, and of general healthy appearance. Her mother sought my advice to relieve her convulsions. It was stated that many years ago she had a fall from a hay-mow and injured the skull, so as to render a surgical operation necessary,—the nature of the operation was unknown; her convulsions were hence attributed by her parents, to some injury of the head received at that time. When attacked by them, her struggles were violent, and her screams terrific, she would suddenly rise from her chair, run into the yard or street crying for help, and fall in a fit. Her temper was exceedingly irritable:—at times she refused to work, and was even violent in language and gesture towards her nearest friends. The case excited a great deal of interest in the neighborhood, some thought a piece of bone was in her brain, others supposed her to have a tape worm, as her appetite was extremely variable, and at times unnatural; others again called her disease epilepsy, while some said that it was the effect of changes in the moon, as her attacks were periodical. So that the poor girl and her parents were driven almost frantic by the doubts, and fears, and hopes, that alternately took possession of their minds. Being told that time, and faithful perseverance in the application of remedies, would be necessary to ensure a fair prospect of her recovery, they thought to be gratified by an immediate cure, and the so-called science of psychology was brought to her aid; but its magic touch could not relieve, or even improve her, and her parents finally agreed to submit to medical treatment. Upon enquiry about her catamenia, it was found that their return was regular, but the quantity was deficient, and the evacuation at-

tended with pain. She was recommended to take exercise freely in the open air, employ herself regularly with active household duties, and use the iron and aloetic preparations as they might be prescribed from time to time—this system was adopted, and carefully executed. In less than three months, she recovered entirely under the use of the *Pilulæ Ferri Carbonatis*, the menstrual flow being fully established, and all things doing well.

The other is an intelligent young woman, of about twenty years of age, who from some impropriety, became irregular in the performance of her menstrual function. When she came under my care, I found her muscles soft and undeveloped, the circulation rather feeble, particularly in the cutaneous capillaries, and the uterine show very irregular in its appearance, and deficient in quantity; her temperament lymphatic, though with a well cultivated and naturally acute intelligence. Soon after the uterine irregularity was discovered, she became the victim of facial and temporal neuralgia, sometimes hemicrania, and sometimes *clavus-hystericus* were present. These attacks came on whenever the nervous system was disturbed by any sudden impression, whether of fright, joy, or any other strong emotion: though they were more violent at the menstrual period; the catamenia were never present more than two days,—oftener twenty-four hours, and frequently a less period of time was the extent of their existence. In this case a rigid system of hygienic treatment seemed to promise the most good. It was recommended in conjunction with the carbonate of iron, and other tonic remedies; during the paroxysms, *assafœtida enemata*, hip baths, and *pediluvium*, with chloroform as a local anæsthetic, and by inhalation, afforded the most relief. The carbonate of iron seemed after a while to irritate the stomach, and the citrate of iron and quinine was substituted—they were all faithfully tried, as was quinine in large doses during the intermissions, without any apparent good result. Under its use however, the

cervical portion of the spine became the seat of acute pain, and the region under the left clavicle—which alternated strangely between these two localities, till it spent itself there, and performed a metastatic route to the diaphragm;—here all the symptoms of impending suffocation, hiccough, &c. became manifest in turn, and the patient, wearied with continued suffering, became languid in spirits, and began to assume a cachectic appearance. She was then put under the use of black hellebore, in conjunction with the carbonate of iron. She continued this for several weeks without any evidence of its emmenagogue properties. The trunk of the body became relieved and her neuralgia returned, during a violent paroxysm of which, she suddenly fell asleep, as if from exhaustion—her slumber was gentle as an infant—and after an hour or two of repose, she roused suddenly, and fell into a condition resembling hemiplegia, her head was inclined to the left side, her eyes staring and fixed upon the wall, and the extremities of the left side apparently paralyzed. She was not sensible of ordinary friction upon the affected part, though she could readily feel the sharp prick of a pin, or the pinching of the skin between the fingers. It was quite difficult to rouse her, but when once disturbed, though naturally a sweet tempered and amiable person, she was irritable, and abrupt in conversation and manner. Friction over the extremities was resorted to, until warmth was restored to the surface, though she continued in this condition for about twelve hours. It terminated in a paroxysm of crying, and she continued much better for several days. She had no recollection of what was being said or done around her. Again, the pectoral muscles and diaphragm became the seat of convulsion, and she appeared to suffer almost beyond the power of endurance with violent asthmatic symptoms, which seemed continually to threaten suffocation. The inhalation of chloroform or ether, or both combined could not be borne, and though it acted so readily in affording relief from the neuralgic pains, it appeared to

aggravate the dyspnœa, whenever it was presented. Dry cupping to the spine, pediluvæ, sinapisms, anodynë injections, &c. were freely resorted to during the attacks, the pulse was always feeble and rapid, the skin cool and pale;—the lancet was entirely inadmissible. Finally she was placed under the use of the dried sulphate of iron, rhubarb, and aloes in combination, and to the gratification of all concerned, the deathlike paleness and coolness of the skin began to disappear; in less than a fortnight the lips assumed a more cherry hue, and the muscles became more firm, so that she was able to leave her apartment, and join in the domestic circle. But the chapter of hysterical vagaries is not yet complete—croup being suddenly imitated in all its violence. I was sent for, and found my patient gasping for breath,—the chest heaving in convulsive efforts to fill the lungs, the characteristic sound was distinct, the arms were thrown out as by sudden spasm, the recumbent posture was intolerable, and the patient cried for help. All this time the pulse was feeble, the skin cool; and there was no evidence of inflammatory action—anodynes, and local stimulants relieved her; and after a while pertussis was ushered in as a modification of the former attack; this was also subdued by the various remedies before used, with the addition of a towel wet with cold water to the throat—the impression thus conveyed to the part contributed greatly to relieve the spasm, and the patient fell into a gentle sleep. In the intermission, the sulphate of iron was continued, and the general health began to improve—it was evident that the red corpuscles were supplied in greater abundance, the pulse gained in volume, the flesh grew firmer, the cachectic appearance gradually gave place to a more ruddy hue, and hopes began to brighten that she would soon menstruate freely, and be restored to health.*

*Soon after this, she removed to a more southern clime to spend the winter, where, with a faithful continuance of the ferruginous treatment, she has greatly improved. Letters are frequently received, informing me of her constant progress toward complete recovery.

Several cases of hæmoptysis, accompanied with cough, and dull sound upon percussion, have been treated on the same plan, in which, when the catamenia appeared under the use of aloes and iron, the engorgement of the pulmonary vessels ceased, the blood flowed freely into the capillaries, the physical signs announced a free admission of oxygen into the air cells, and the vital fluid being improved in quality,—confirmed good health was the result. Epistaxis appearing to an alarming extent in one instance, was relieved by the same remedies: and a variety of other diseases—which, when they occur among men, are treated by the lancet and anti-phlogistic medicines,—have been relieved by imparting tone to the circulation, and increasing the vitality of the blood; so that the evidence in favor of tonic and supporting medication and diet, in most of the diseases of young women with enfeebled menstrual powers, appears to be conclusive.

We have seen, by the examples already cited, that hæmorrhages, though often treated on the principle of diverting the blood from the part affected, by a reduction of its volume, which may be judicious practice, in extra-sanguine constitutions, have been subdued by a directly opposite course. Convulsions also, for which the lancet has been considered, and still is by many, an essential, and sovereign remedy, are cured by medicines, the specific operation of which is to give tone to the circulatory system, and improve the character of the vital fluid. Certainly we cannot doubt the controlling power of the uterus over the constitution, and I am sure we cannot be too careful in our enquiries about the menstrual function, in all cases of disease occurring in females, and particularly in those under age. Had the persons above referred to, been depleted by the lancet, or powerful antiphlogistic medicines, though they exhibited symptoms of congestion, and suffered acute pain, they would in all probability, have been made the hopeless victims of incurable disease, and brought to a premature death.

It may seem presumptuous to speak with so much certainty upon a subject involving the preservation of human life, the issue of which is not in human hands; but if there is any truth in science, or any evidence to be derived from experience, there is power in medicine when properly applied, to overcome the assaults of disease, with but comparatively few exceptions. Our greatest danger is in diagnosis; a mistake made in this respect may lead to fatal results. Hence it is of the utmost importance to discriminate between real or organic disease, and a mere disturbance or perversion of natural functions. Nothing is easier under such circumstances, than to fix by what is called heroic practice, a structural malady, upon a part only disordered in function; when by a course calculated to calm excited nervous action, to soothe the irregular movements of the heart, and to quiet the general economy by moderating remedies, while we strengthen the vital forces, and guard the nervous centres from increased disturbance, we may ward off alarming and fatal diseases, that would be readily invited and established by a different mode of treatment. Where we see hysterical convulsions, or hysteria in any form, we are reminded by the very name of its sympathies, and connections with the generative system. To bleed in convulsions, without reference to their character or cause, is adopted by many even at this day; very young children are sometimes subjected to the lancet by this arbitrary rule, and though depletion by this means may in some cases be called for, we are satisfied that a candid enquiry into the pathology of the parts involved, will not justify us in the general adoption of the remedy. It was the opinion of Dr. Marshall Hall that all convulsive diseases have their origin in the spinal chord, and though in the present state of pathological research, it may be difficult to give a systematic account of the changes which occur in the nervous structure, during convulsions, enough has been learned by experience, and inferred from analogy, to warrant the physician

in attributing to nervous origin, many diseases which have been formerly considered and treated as inflammatory. The effects of a mechanical division of the nerves, or of injury to the substance of the spinal chord, are familiar to all; hence we readily infer from these results, that when disease attacks the nervous centres, we may have it displayed in various forms, modified by the seat or extent of the lesion; and as the object of the nervous mass within the spinal column, is to send out supplies of motive and sentient power to different parts of the body, it is reasonable to assign those diseases, which affect the motions and sensations, to the same source, and to address our remedies particularly to the seat of the mischief. We often see convulsions brought on by a sudden mental impression—the whole nervous system sympathises with the excited brain, and involuntary contractions and relaxations of the muscles alternate with each other, constituting spasm or convulsion. The physician is called in haste to administer relief; he finds his patient writhing under violent contortions of the body, her eyelids closed and trembling, the balls thrown back into the orbit, and other characteristics of hysterical spasm. If he bleeds, he may probably afford sudden relief; but what has he done to remove the cause? True, the remedy may remove the engorgement of some important vessels, but that engorgement in such cases, depends upon impaired nervous energy, by which the check upon the arterial system is withheld, and the equilibrium between it, and the nervous system destroyed. The pulse does not indicate inordinate vascular action, and though the head may be hot, and the face suffused, the feet and hands are generally cold, and often livid. There is not too much blood in the body, but it is unequally distributed. If you take a portion of it away, you create a second evil, where there existed only one. You reduce the energy of the circulatory system, which, added to nervous irregularity, complicates the case, and renders the cure more difficult. The two forces should be

equipotent, to sustain an equal relation to each other; and if one becomes reduced below the normal standard, it does not seem in accordance with true philosophy or science, to reduce the other likewise, in order to maintain them both at the point of perfect health; but to elevate the one to its natural condition, the very effort to do which will subdue the excitement of the other, and thus restore their mutual relations. But after all that may be said of medical treatment, physicians can do more permanent good to society, by inculcating correct *rules* in regard to physical education, and by insisting upon their observance in families over which they exercise medical control, than by any effort to find out remedies for the disease when once established; as it is much easier to prevent, than to cure, this obstinate malady.

The habits of what is called *refined* society, bestow upon those who observe them, a large share of physical disorder; and just in proportion as the individual may be controlled by the false lessons they inculcate, does a perversion of the moral feelings, and a deterioration of the intellectual vigor, ensue. In the education of youth, both at home and at school, too little regard is paid to the development of the physical system. Parents and teachers are far too ready to overlook the fact, that a perfect mental constitution depends upon a perfect physical organization; they seem to forget that in their efforts to cultivate the intelligence, and strengthen the mental powers, there are more than four hundred muscles, a heart, lungs, a liver, a stomach, a uterus, and other viscera, each of which has its appropriate office in the physical system; and that upon the improvement, and development of these, depends the improvement and development of the intellect; that if they would preserve the health, prolong the life, and render useful and practical, the acquirements that may be obtained, the growth of the mind must not be allowed to outstrip the growth of the body. With children of the female sex, this is more particularly true. The manner in which young girls are made to dress, is of

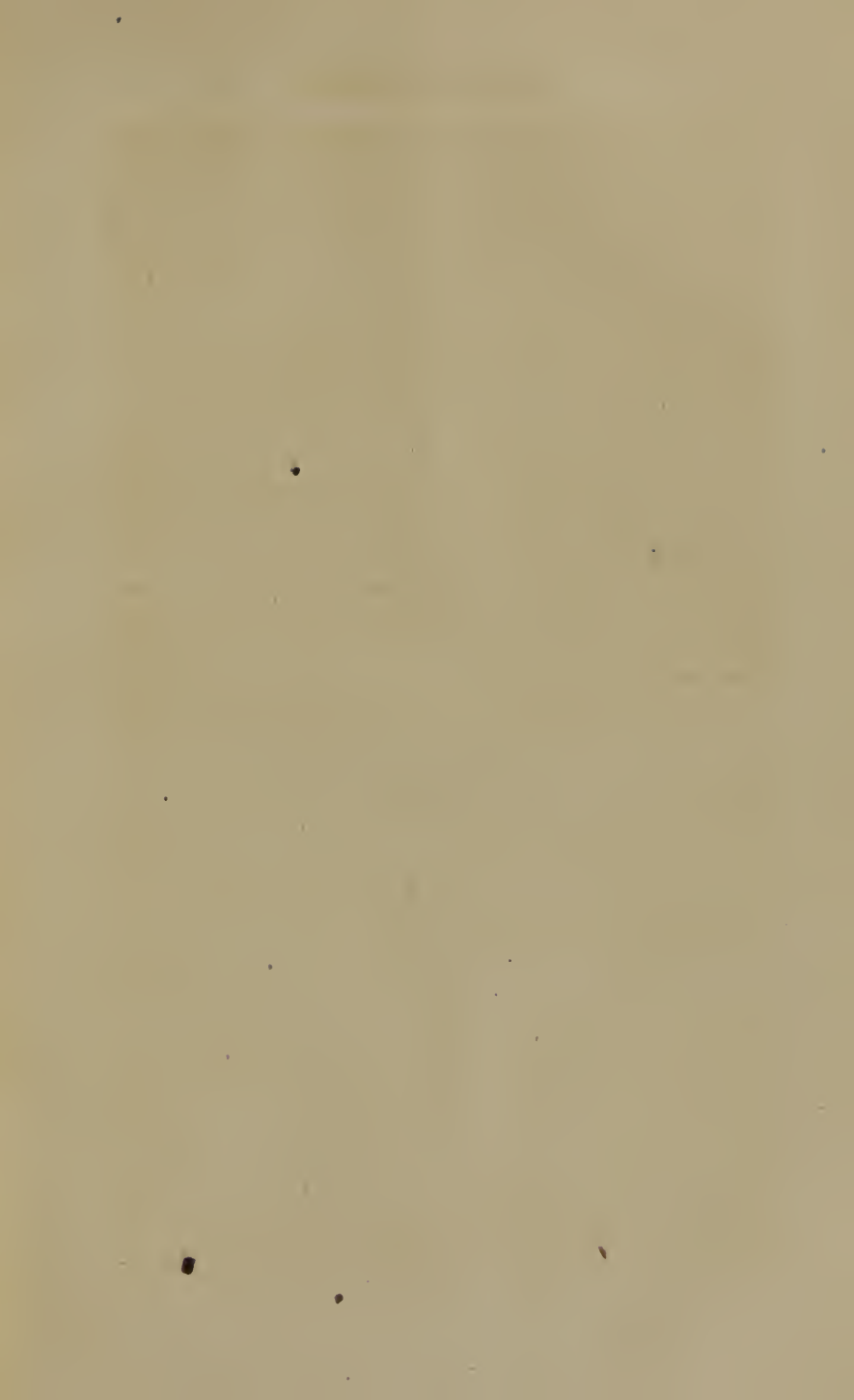
itself, sufficient to entail upon the sex, the evils of an unequal temperament, feeble digestive organs, undeveloped uterine powers, and a general depravity of the physical condition. The under garments are drawn tightly around the waist,—they *must be tight* in order to retain them in their position, and they are fastened with small tapes or chords—these strings pass over the region of important viscera, and the integuments are pressed inwards upon them, with a force sufficient to interrupt at least the cutaneous circulation, while the weight of the clothing is constantly bearing down all the contents of the abdomen, upon the bladder and uterus, in the pelvis below. The powers of the stomach, are over-taxed with unwholesome and indigestible food, the ready assimilation of which is prevented, and an imperfectly organized fluid, is thrown into the venous system. The chest is too often compressed, and the thoracic organs deprived of their full play, so that the heart labours to supply the lungs, and they in turn, are scarcely able to receive a sufficient quantity of oxygen to vitalize the blood. With such restraints upon the natural powers of the body, is it any marvel that the uterus fails to elaborate its secretions, or that when they do appear, they should be deficient in quantity, or in the qualities of a healthy discharge? Or is it difficult to understand how the great sympathetic system, conveys the morbid impression to the spinal chord, which sends back a reflex movement that is answered by muscular contortions and convulsion?

Whenever a hysterical, or otherwise delicate girl, is submitted to me for treatment, whether she be suffering from pains in the head, breast, or joints, or whether she have ammenorrhea, or dysmenorrhea, or if she has never menstruated at all; my advice to her is, to wear flannel next to her body, to put straps or jackets to her under clothing, so that no undue pressure will be made upon her waist, and that she may avoid the weight of from ten to twenty pounds upon her loins, to the great detriment of her digestive, and

uterine organs; as well as to prevent all compression upon her pectoral or spinal muscles, by which the motions of her upper extremities may be restrained. Having been relieved of all unnatural and injurious appliances, her heart may have room to pulsate, her lungs to expand, and her abdominal and pelvic viscera, to perform their functions. With such preparatory measures, the system will more readily respond to the remedies that may be administered, and the physician be enabled to promise at least some good.

The present system of education, common in our schools, and seminaries, is generally charged by the popular voice, with injuring the health of pupils; and the remark has often been made that boarding-schools for girls, are good manufactories for uterine and hysterical complaints. The question is not unfrequently asked, whether a derangement of the menstrual function, is not the prominent feature of disease in the institution, to which reference has been made—While candor compels an admission of the fact, the conviction that a deficiency of physical education at home, is the primary and the chief cause of it, is equally manifest. Parents send their daughters away from home, to complete an accomplished education, just at that period of their lives, when the generative system is beginning to be developed, when the sensations, and sympathies of the uterus, are the most delicate, and most likely to be disturbed; and if in the course of study to which they may be subjected, their health fails, or becomes in the least impaired, how much more easy is it to attribute the decline of their physical powers, to excessive mental application, than to the fact that parents themselves have not trained their children in accordance with those physiological laws which nature has established, and a departure from which, is in all cases, visited by the penalty of ill health. It was never intended that the body should succumb to any reasonable amount of mental effort, but when it does, it may generally be attributed to the imposition of artificial restraints in early youth. A high rank of intellectual

culture, cannot be gained, without the expenditure of a great amount of both mental and physical strength; to supply the means of making this effort, the bodily health must be fully sustained; the mind breaks the body down, because the latter is not allowed to be early developed to its perfect proportions, it is crippled in its capacity for endurance, by the habits imposed upon it by the oppressive regulations of fashionable life. If the physical education of children, was conducted according to the dictates of sound philosophy and science, nature would be allowed to develop herself, and would furnish abundant resources to meet all the demands of the most exalted mental culture. To establish rules for the bodily training of children, and to render them practical, is a high prerogative, which belongs peculiarly to members of the medical profession; and for its conscientious exercise, we are justly responsible. To perform it faithfully, would be to save ourselves a great deal of anxiety and labour, confer a permanent benefit upon society—and reflect lasting honor upon our beloved profession.







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